

Keith Johnson

Q: This is Kathy Staley with Keith Johnson on May 26th, 2010.

Let's just start off with an introduction of your full name, and your age, and where you grew up, and what type of community was it?

A: My name is Joseph Keith Johnson. I am 23. I am from Wilkes -- kind of a large community. I grew up in smaller communities in childhood, and then finally moved to North Wilkesboro, which is a bigger community, when I was in my teens. So...

Q: Where were you prior to moving to North Wilkesboro?

A: I lived in the Mountain View area, the Hays area, through elementary school, and then Mountain View area in middle school, and then North Wilkesboro in high school.

Q: OK. So you would have gone to elementary up in the North Wilkes High School area?

A: I went to Mountain View Elementary. And then that was where I went to middle school. And then I went to North Wilkes High School.

Q: All right. Could you describe a little bit about your family? You lived with Mom, Dad, like... ?

A: I lived with the whole family 'til I was six. My parents divorced. I lived with my dad, and so I was -- my dad and

my brother, and sister, and my sister moved out when she was 16, so I just lived with my dad and my brother until I was 16. And then I moved in with my mother. So...

Q: And that's when you started commuting from North Wilkesboro up to North High School?

A: Mmm-hmm. I went from Mountain View to North Wilkesboro, and then drove from North Wilkesboro to North every day.

Q: OK. Could you describe how you first heard about what gay/homosexuality was?

A: I don't really remember learning about it, or knowing anything about it, other than, what I looked up in, like, eighth grade and ninth grade.

Q: So you weren't hearing about it at church or in school?

A: Not when I started to understand, like, who I was as a person, I didn't hear anything about it, no.

Q: Mmm-hmm. Could you talk about that process of becoming aware of who you are?

A: Mmm, yeah. I just kind of noticed that in seventh grade, I noticed that I was not attracted to females. And then from seventh grade to ninth grade, I struggled with it. I prayed about it over and over and over, constantly praying for, like, two years. You know, I didn't want to be that way. I didn't like it. About tenth grade, summer of tenth grade, I think, I was going to go kill myself. And I was

in my bedroom, whatever, and I had wrote all my suicide letters, and then, like, my dog came in, which is kind of ironic, but she was the one who kept me from doing it, because I didn't know who would take care of her. And so then I finally had to come to terms with who I was, so I came out as bisexual to myself and one other friend. And then I was bisexual for about six months, and then kind of just came out as gay. So it was pretty tough.

Q: It sounds like it. Had you been raised in a church that was telling you that these feelings were wrong?

A: No. I mean, they just didn't talk about it. I mean, either that or I don't remember it. My dad quit going to church as soon as him and my mom divorced, and I don't remember my mom going back until her fourth marriage. And then, at that church, they didn't really say anything about gay people. They just talked about, like, guys spiking their hair and wearing jewelry. They never really came out and said anything specifically about gay people.

Q: What was the significance of spiking your hair?

A: I'm not really sure. He was, like, making fun of them almost, saying that guys shouldn't do it, like spike their hair. And here I am sitting in church with spiked hair, a necklace, you know, a bracelet. So I was uncomfortable.

Q: Mmm-hmm. How was your family?

A: Well, it was my senior year. My last day at work was on a Tuesday. My dad called me, and I was moving to App [Appalachian State University] that Friday into the dorm my freshman year. He called me and told me he had something to ask me. So I left work and drove to my sister's house. And then my dad had asked me if I was gay. And so I told him that I was tired of living a lie, and so I came out to my dad. And then he started crying and threw up religion and God in my face, and grandkids, and so then I got upset. I left, and then I called my mom. And, you know, I didn't really come out to her; I kind of did. She said she had already knew since I was two, so -- and then she took it well. And then my sister is amazing, so she took it well. And then my brother's best friend came out at the same time I did, so he didn't really have an option *but* to take it well. So it was fun.

(laughter)

Q: It doesn't sound like it was very fun.

A: Well, I mean, like I was just so tired of it. I really was. I mean, I had been going to a gay [night]club since I was 16 -- I had a fake ID. And so every weekend, I would go down there.

Q: To where?

A: Odyssey, in Winston-Salem. And so I just got really, really fed up with living two lives. So I mean, like, you know -- I laughed when I told my dad I was tired of living a lie and that yes, I was gay. I don't know if that was a way of dealing with the stress or the emotions, but, I found that funny, I mean for about five minutes. And then, that's when the tears set in and the stronger emotions. And then I left. So...

Q: How did you work yourself through the whole process from, like, seventh/eighth grade to tenth grade, when you started trying to accept it?

A: It was hard. I tried not to think about it at all. And I prayed about it. I tried not to think about it at all. I literally got sick when I thought about it. I knew it wasn't OK; I knew it wasn't right then. So I mean, it was rough, but I mean, I don't really remember.. I just remember not ever wanting to think about it, or, you know, if I caught myself looking at a guy, I would just turn away really quick.

Q: So avoidance?

A: Mmm-hmm.

Q: Some LGBT youth start self-medicating or hurting themselves. Did you do any of that?

A: Not at all. I mean, I pretty much isolated myself in my bedroom, and I really, really focused on my schoolwork. I didn't hang out with anybody after school. I didn't do anything but go to work, come home and focus on schoolwork. So I just threw myself into my academics, and that was my way of coping with everything.

Q: How was school?

A: In high school, like people would say certain I don't know. The ignorant people would say mean things in the halls. I remember a guy I went to high school with, he came out *in* high school, and as soon as he came out, everything stopped. Which was ironic, because he caught all of the hell, and then none once he came out. But I didn't -- I wasn't ready to come out in high school; I didn't want everybody knowing. I never really got, like, physically harassed or verbally harassed. People would say things, but I mean, I really didn't care.

Q: It was more general? Or did they just say things in passing?

A: More so things in passing, like the older guys. And then once I, you know, got established in high school and I moved my way up, it was pretty cool. Everybody knew me, everybody liked me, so...

Q: What happened with the other guy? So he was getting harassed before he came out, and then it sort of dissipated?

A: Yeah. As soon as he came out, it stopped. I mean, it stopped altogether. It was just ironic, because he caught it all, and everybody knew. And then when he came out, I mean, it just stopped. So...

Q: How did that make you feel?

A: I was like, "You know, maybe *I* should come out." But I mean, like he didn't have the reputation that I had, either, and he wasn't in any of the clubs that I was in. And I was afraid that if I came out, I would lose my positions, or I wouldn't get voted back. And that was really important to me, because it kept me going in high school.

Q: Mmm-hmm. So you were doing other things than just working and home work? You were socializing?

A: Yeah, in school. Out of school, it just -- it didn't happen. It was all in school.

Q: So you avoided the dances and things of that nature?

A: No. The dances I did not avoid because I was on the student council -- I was the vice president -- and then I set up the dance committee. So I got the DJ, did the decorations, and all that. But I went to the dance, and as

soon as the dance was over, I went home, so... And I didn't go to any of the football games, no basketball games -- nothing, other than a club meeting or the occasional dance that I helped put together.

Q: Do you remember consciously thinking through, "I'm not going to do X," or "I am going to do Y?"

A: No. I just wasn't interested in sports at all. And football games were a little scary at North, because people typically did get into fights or they got into arguments, and I just didn't want to get caught up in that, or be the reason why a fight got started. So I stayed away from those. But I really just wasn't interested in going at all. So...

Q: In the -- because you graduated around 2000? Is that right?

A: High school, I graduated in 2005.

Q: Two thousand and five? I'm doing my math wrong, then. So there were already TV shows that had openly gay actors, like Ellen came out.

A: I don't remember watching *Ellen*. I remember watching *Queer as Folk*. And then I remember a cousin who was really close to the family, I went over there for New Year's and they had a marathon on, and she was like, "Keith, I think you should come in here and watch it with me." Like she had

already knew, and that was her way of letting me know it was OK. Which was really nice. And then I think *Real World/Road Rules* might have been out in 2005 and they had gay characters. And then I remember watching *Boy Meets Boy*, which was a TV show.

Q: So you had access to cable?

A: I did. But it would have to be after everybody in the house went to bed before I watched any of it.

Q: Did anyone ever -- like your mother knew since you were two. Did she ever drop hints like this cousin did?

A: No, she was really depressed and in the hospital, and I remember going outside with her, and we probably shouldn't have, but we were smoking. And then she asked me, but I was like, you know, "You are depressed. I don't know how you are going to take this." And so I lied to her and told her no, because you are in the hospital for depression, so I just don't want to add onto that if -- you know, I wasn't sure.

Q: Mmm-hmm. How is your relationship with your parents now?

A: Me and my mom have always been close. That never changed. My dad told me that any other guy was not welcome in his home. And I was in a relationship my senior year in high school which lasted through my freshman year of college, and it was my first love. And I remember him telling me

that his mom was in Atlanta, his godmother was in Chicago, his dad was in New Mexico, and he didn't have anywhere to go for Christmas. So I went and picked him up from Greensboro and brought him up here. And that was the first time -- because we spent Christmas Eve with my dad, and that was the first time that it clicked with my dad, Keith's not here because, you know, my friend was with me, or the guy I was dating at the time was with me. So I just chose not to go to my dad's. And so he called me and apologized, and told us that we were both welcome. And it's been a slow process, but we are bonding now, and getting a lot closer than ever before.

Q: What's that process been like? Have you taken him to read books or talk to other parents?

A: No, I have not suggested any of that whatsoever. I mean, this has been all on him, what he is doing. When *Prayers for Bobby* came out,¹ I suggested to him that he watch it. I don't know if he ever did; I didn't ask him, because that's a tough movie. I never suggested any books or any other material or websites or nothing. This has been my dad working through things for himself, I think. Which is better than watching a movie, I think. So...

¹ *Prayers for Bobby* is a movie based on the true story of Mary Griffith and her gay son Bobby who committed suicide after his Christian mother rejected him.

Q: And your siblings and your mom, it sounds like they were on the page with you when you came out to them.

A: Well, like my brother, we didn't really talk about it at all, or discuss it. And then he joined the Marine Corps. He dropped out of Wilkes Community College, joined the Marine Corps. And then we had a cookout going-away for Basic, and then he outed me to the entire family on my dad's side, which you are looking at -- you know, I hate to say it, but like rednecks, like really religious people, and it scared me to death. And I get there and nobody is speaking to me, and I don't know why until *after* it's over. And so all close relationships that I had with aunts and uncles are nonexistent. That was really tough, and that's still tough today.

Q: So it's continued to this day?

A: Oh, yeah. I walked across the stage May the 9th [Appalachian State University's graduation], I wanted to have a big cookout with the whole family showing up. But they didn't, and I didn't want that, because the situation that I'm in now. But I knew that I could have it if the situation was different -- if I wasn't gay, they would be there. So... I knew they would come if my dad invited them, but I begged him not to because it would have been fake -- you know, not real. So I just chose to just go

with my immediate family. But I mean, it's tough. Because I was really close to two of my aunts, who don't speak to me at all anymore. So...

Q: These are your dad's sisters?

A: Dad's sisters, yes. My mom's side of the family, she ended up telling her sisters. I mean, we only see them once a year anyway, so I could care less. I mean, I really could. I hate to say it, but I never see them, so it wouldn't matter one way or another. So my grandma does not know. Her mother does not know, and probably will never find out.

Q: What's the religious background of your father? He stopped attending, but...

A: Southern Baptist. And then my mom's side of the family is Baptist. And they're churchgoers, too. Like radio station, get on there and preach; every Sunday morning go to church; Wednesdays -- everything. So... I come from a very religious family.

Q: How did you resolve it for yourself? 'Cause from seventh/eighth grade to the tenth grade, it sounded like you had sublemented some of these religious teachings --

A: Oh, yeah.

Q: -- and --

A: I gave up completely. Like I am like, "I -- you know, I prayed. I asked you for two years to help me change, to

make things different, and you didn't." I mean, I completely gave up. Altogether, completely gave up. And then I wasn't anti-religion until I got up to App. And it's not that I try to convert people away from religion, but I don't believe in any of it. Nothing. Hardly at all. Like no Bible, no church; you know, is there a higher power? Probably, but... I gave it all up, completely.

Q: Yeah? That's a very common response to it. So tell me about how you found Odyssey...

(laughter)

A: I was hanging out with a girl from high school, and she had a friend who went to West [Wilkes High School] who had dropped out. And it was almost like a triangle of love. So I met him, and I am like, the whole "gaydar" thing, and I am like, "Hmm... you know, this is different." But I knew that they had a relationship, and a physical relationship. And then me and him developed a physical relationship. So it was really odd, and really awkward

Q: **Did he identify as gay or bisexual to you? Did your female friend ever learn about the relationship?**

A: But he was the one who introduced me to Odyssey. Like he gave me his old permit, and he had his driver's license, so we were able to go down there together every weekend. And that's how I got in. So I have been going since I was 16.

Q: And could you describe what it was like?

A: The first time, I remember getting, really angry. I am new to the whole scene, I am new to the club, and *everybody* will flock to you like fresh meat. And it was just -- it was scary, and I did not like it at all. I was really, really angry that everybody would not leave me alone; I couldn't enjoy myself. The first time I went I used a fake ID, which made me, like, 23, so everybody thought I was a lot older than what I was. And it was just creepy. It really was. But then, I fell in love with the community there, the club in general, the environment. You know, being surrounded by people like me was awesome.

Q: What was the environment like?

A: Well, once you got over the initial creepers, you develop friendships with people that you realize were from Wilkes, or from Elkin, which is really close to Wilkes, or even Winston, or Yadkin County. I mean, anywhere. And so, it was like one big family. Like I met a lot of people *in* Wilkes that I had no idea were gay, or I didn't even know who they were. So I mean, and then I was able to hang out with them in Wilkes, and not necessary at the Odyssey all the time. So it was like a big family.

Q: Talk about the gay community in Wilkes County.

A: The gay community in Wilkes I thought was really small, until I came to App and started going to the Odyssey. Then I realized just how big it is. But I mean, it's like a secret club almost in Wilkes. Like you meet one gay person, and then you are going to meet ten more. You meet those ten, and you are going to meet, you know, 15 more. So it was like snowball sampling almost: you meet one, and you just continue to meet, continue to meet, and then you realize, "Wow, Wilkes County has a lot of gay people in it. A lot." So it was refreshing to know that I come from such, you know, a backwoods area, small community, and then -- from Wilkes County, and then to realize that "Wow, there is a lot more people here like me." So, it was -- it's nice.

Q: Do people get together for parties? Or is it more of a just one-on-one friendships?

A: It was all one-on-one friendships. It was not like when you say "party," it wouldn't be like your typical party: "Let's go drink and, you know, do whatever." I mean, it was, like, social gatherings where we'd go to -- you know, I use this term "fag hag." We would go to, you know, Brandy's house, and then she would have a pool, and we would just all meet there and, like, cook out and hang out.

So it wasn't like parties. A lot of us wasn't even old enough to drink. It was really nice.

Q: So you knew people from various high schools too --

A: Mmm-hmm.

Q: -- there?

A: Like I went to North and only knew people from North. I mean, Wilkes County is a huge county, and you just don't go to West and, like, you know, hang out with people from West. You stick to your own area. But then, you know, when I realized that some gay people were from West, or from Central or East, you know, we would drive, you know, 35-45 minutes to East to hang out with people there. Or they would drive to Wilkes, or we would go to West area. So I mean, it was nice. It really was.

Q: Well, were other people who were teenagers as well, their responses in high school, were most people closeted? Were there a mixture of out people?

A: It was really weird, because most people who were out came from West, and most people who people knew were gay and kind of were OK with it were from Central, but Central was more of an open-minded school anyway. And then from North and East, you had more of your closeted people. But then from West, you had people who dropped out. Like I knew at least three or four of my friends who went to West and

dropped out because of their sexuality, so... And I didn't know anybody from, you know, Central, East, or North who did that.

Q: Hmm. That's interesting.

A: Mmm-hmm.

Q: Do you ever wonder why?

A: West is probably one of the most close-minded. I mean, people think North is, you know, trashy and *the* redneck school. And it might be.

Q: Traphill?

A: Traphill. I mean, it might be; whatever. But I mean, like we are also caring and loving, as opposed to West. Like the relationship I am in now, he came up to Millers Creek, where I was staying over the summer, and we got evicted from where we were staying because of parking issues, but it wasn't parking issues, it was because he was black. You know, there is no black students that I know of, or Hispanic students that I know of, to this day that go to West.

Q: Really?

A: I mean, there may be, but I don't know. I know when I was in high school, it just wasn't heard of. You didn't do it. You don't transfer, you don't go to West if you are black

or Hispanic, you go to somewhere else. So West is pretty, pretty crazy.

Q: But there were -- I know there are black students at East. Were that at West as well?

A: I don't remember being any --

Q: I'm sorry.

A: -- black --

Q: I meant North. I'm getting my directions...

A: Yeah. Mmm-hmm. The guy I that I was talking about earlier who came out and then everything stopped, he was mixed. But I mean, he was black. And I think my senior year, I actually counted them, and there were five. I counted five black people. I mean, which was good for North.

Q: Mmm-hmm. What size was your graduation class of people?

A: Oh, there were so many that didn't come, because they were pregnant, or they dropped out, or they wasn't there. I want to say a hundred -- between 150 and 180. I don't really remember. I want to say 172 because that's the number that comes into my head, but I really don't know.

Q: Mmm-hmm. OK. You came out to one friend during high school?

A: First, yeah.

Q: First?

A: For about six months. Mmm-hmm.

Q: And then how did it progress from there?

A: I didn't really -- I don't remember telling any -- I told her, and then I told another close friend. And --

Q: Did you ever tell the out student?

A: No. Hmm-mmm. No, not at all. But then, like other students that I thought were gay, I ended up seeing them my senior year in high school at Odyssey. Because by then, you know, some of us were 18 and could actually go legally. So I seen a lot of them there, but it was like a spoken understanding, like, "You didn't see me here; I didn't see you here." You know, respect that. And we did, until some -- a bunch of girls went down there, and then they seen me, and then that's how I got outed. But...

Q: So what grade was that?

A: My senior year.

Q: Your senior year?

A: Mmm-hmm. Because a girl seen me and told my brother, and my brother told my cousin, and then she told her dad, and then he worked with my dad, so he was talking to my dad about it. And so, it was crazy.

Q: How did it feel having all these people talk (laughter) about you? That must have been frustrating...

A: I mean, I didn't really care. I really, honestly didn't, because I know the people who mattered wasn't the people

who were talking. You know, it was the people who had nothing better to do with themselves or their lives but to make others feel like crap. And I don't think they had any bad intentions of doing it. She told my brother, and then my brother was just talking to my cousin. And then she was just talking to her dad, and then he told my dad. It wasn't that a lot of people were talking; it just got told to the wrong people. But I hated her for telling her dad. I hated her for a long time.

Q: Did you ever talk to her about that?

A: Yeah. I called her, and I cussed her up one side and down the other. She was pregnant at the time, and I remember her saying really bad things about her and the situation she was in. And then, I honestly just didn't care. I'm like, "You crushed my world. I want to crush your world." And so, like, two years later, we talked one time. We made up; we both apologized. And, I told her I didn't mean to say the things that I said; she told me she realized how much damage she had done. And then we just had a spoken understanding, like, you know, "I accept your apology, you accepted mine, but that's it." We don't talk anymore; we are not friends. We needed that closure. We got it, and we moved on.

Q: Mmm-hmm. Did other people in your school year about it from there?

A: Like I said, I came out about Tuesday; I moved to Boone that Friday.

Q: So --

A: There was no time really for people to go around talking. I remember going to Homecoming the year after I was in college, and then, like, you know, people were like, "Oh, we knew. We knew," And I even had a teacher; she was like, "Oh, I knew you were gay." She was like, "From the moment you walked into class," she was like, "I knew." And she was like, "I'm glad you came out." So, I was welcomed by a lot of the students. I won the Outstanding Senior Male Award my senior year, and it was nice to win that award, but it's also nice to know that everybody who voted for me accepted me once I came back to Wilkes. Everybody. So all my friends, they're OK with it. And I hung out with a bunch of girls, and I never told them until one of them got married. And then I went to her wedding, which was just last year, and all of them let me know that, "That's why we hung out with you. We knew you were gay. You know, you wasn't like every other boy." So, it was nice.

Q: Did you have any male friends?

A: No. Not really. At all. I have a twin brother, and he would have his guy friends over, but I would go to my room. I can't remember having one close relationship with another guy at all, like friends. So... No.

Q: Is that something that you were OK with?

A: I was OK with it. And when I came to college, I mean, like I am still on a mission to find a really good guy friend. And I now have a circle of friends, and there's seven of us, and we're all really close. But I mean, for the first three years of college, I really wanted that, and I wanted them to be straight, which is really funny. And then I was like, "OK. Well, maybe he can just be gay." But I never found it at all, until I met these seven friends.

Q: Can you talk about how you chose to come to ASU?

A: I was a mama's boy, and I knew if I came here, I would only be 45 minutes from her. It was close to home. And I don't come from a family with a lot of money. So I remember, you know, telling them, "I need to apply to college. I want to get out of Wilkes. I want a better education." And then my dad gave me enough money to apply to one school, and I remember applying to this one. So a lot went into it. You know, money: I don't have the money to apply to everywhere. But then, also, I want to come up here because I'm really close to my mother. So that's why I came here.

Q: And you chose not to go the community college route.

A: No. No. I felt like way too many people went there. I just didn't want to go at all. I didn't want to be in Wilkes. I mean, I wanted to get out. Which is funny. I mean, you come into Boone, which is no bigger than Wilkes, but it's still it's away from home.

Q: Mmm-hmm. Yeah. Wilkes County's census from 2000 that registered the same-sex couples, it's, like, triple the number that's in Watauga County.

A: Really?

Q: Mmm-hmm. But we don't have but 50,000 people in Watauga. Boone is 15,000. So you moved from a city in North Wilkesboro down to Boone. How did you feel -- when you came and started noticing the gay community, so-called "community," noticing the difference between Wilkes and Boone?

A: Well, I mean, in Wilkes, it was almost like a rare occasion. We didn't get together too often. I mean, and we seen each other a lot at the club. Then I came up here, and I knew my club days were over. I didn't have a car, and I didn't want to ask somebody for a ride, and I didn't want to out myself up here. So I came out at home, and I came up here with the intentions of look, I want to be open, but at the same time, I don't want to go around

telling everybody just yet. Like I don't know how these people are going to react.

And so then I ended up slowly meeting a few other gay people in my dorm, and then we heard of SAGA. We looked it up on the AppalNet, which, you know, we were just like, "Well, I wonder if there is a group?" So we looked it up, and then we kind of went first semester. And then it was once a month we would go. And then I started going more regularly the second semester, and then I realized like, "Wow!" You know, I mean, like they were so accepting and so nice. And it was a lot different than other gay scenes that I had been in, because they were educating, and people didn't treat you like an object or a piece of fresh meat. So... and that was something that I was not used to. Being new to a gay scene, I was just like -- you know, people would flock to you, and it was creepy and scary. And I didn't get that up here.

Q: Talk about what SAGA was. It was "BGLAAD" at that point?²

A: Mmm-hmm, BGLAAD. I remember it being in the bottom of I. G. Greer [Hall], in the [Equity] office, and I remember it being a lot of older students. Like I didn't know anybody

² Sexual Awareness Group at Appalachia (SAGA) formed in 1990. During the 1990s, it had many name changes until it was Bisexuals, Gays, Lesbians, and Allies Advocating for Diversity. In 2008, the name was changed to Sexuality and Gender Alliance (SAGA).

who was younger, or, like, even a freshman. So I mean, that was kind of overwhelming, and it kind of kept me from going, because I was just like, you know, "These are older students. I don't really fit in here." And then I went back, and it just -- it continued to grow and grow, and grow, and grow. And it was like a home. I mean, like I was able to be myself there. That became like my new club almost, but a civilized, educated club.

Q: So there weren't "chickenhawks," which is what you were describing at the Odyssey --

A: Right.

Q: -- a bunch of people coming onto you?

A: Right. Yeah. I didn't have that up here. Like people left me alone, they respected me, you know, and it -- and that felt nice.

Q: Had you already been reading about what gay life was like?

A: No. Hmm-mmm. Not at all.

Q: So you just learned what it was in seventh/eighth grade?

A: Yeah. I didn't even really learn then. Like I pretty much wanted to know what it was that -- you know, I'm like, "What is this?" And then I'm like, "OK, this is gay, but I don't want to be gay." But I didn't really look anything up -- nothing. Like no history or nothing. And then freshman year, I remember in English 1000 or 1100 -- I

don't know -- we did a term paper, and I did mine on the history of the gay movement. And so that's when I really, really got interested in the history of LGBT. And then SAGA helped with that a lot, like played a role. And I remember a friend in BGLAAD then let me borrow a few books, which was really nice. I mean, like I didn't know you; she didn't know me really. And then she was like, you know, "These books will be helpful." So I was like, "Wow! This is a really good community."

Q: Mmm-hmm. That's why I was asking if any of the educational things at SAGA/BGLAAD were particularly helpful with coming to terms --

A: The lady who let me borrow the books were -- she was the VP of Education. So I mean, like what their -- some of their meetings were really funny like they are today, and then some are serious, for being educated about other things.

Q: Could you talk about some of the different topics?

A: I mean, if I can remember any from when it was BGLAAD, I don't remember, I remember talking about marriage, and then adopting, because I didn't know anything about the two, really. And I was just like, "Hmm." And so then I wanted to look up more history and then I did, on my own time, in my dorm room. And then that's when I got really involved in that term paper, and I just wanted to know everything

that I could possibly know. So then I just kept going back, and kept going back. And I just got more educated, and got to know more people, and just fell in love with the community.

Q: I know you did become an officer. It sounds like you just continued that student council leadership roles.

A: Yeah. I did choir in high school, and then I was involved in a lot of clubs. And then I came up here, and I'm like, "I need to get involved. I need that back in my life." But I didn't know what to do. I looked up a lot of clubs, and I'm just like, "Hmm-mmm. No. This doesn't work. This doesn't work." I wanted to do the student government, then I was just like, "Mmm, no." And then I joined Gospel Choir, which was totally wrong for me to do. I did not like it at all, I didn't enjoy it, so I never went back. And then I found SAGA. I ran, the first semester, as VP of Admin, and lost. And then I ran for VP of Activism; won that one. That office wasn't for me, so I ran for VP of Community; won it. I ran for it again; won it. And then took a semester off, because [former SAGA faculty advisor] Mary Ballard would not let me run for president. And then I was the president for a year.

Q: Could you talk about the challenges and successes that you've had?

A: Oh, the number one challenge is just the attendance in SAGA, getting people to show up and getting people to stay. At the beginning of the semester, it's really big. And then, the people who really are interested and devoted to the club will be there throughout the whole year. And then at the end, it just tapers off with final exams, and people -- I don't know -- moving on. And then as you get older, like juniors and seniors, they kind of quit going because they have more on their plate. So attendance was a big issue. And then changing the rules. You got to have a 2.5 GPA, or you need to do this or do that before you can become an officer I felt was really restricting. I have expressed my opinions the gay community has enough restrictions and enough standards, and then you are just adding more for this organization. When I first start doing it, I wasn't interested in school or academics. Like I kind of let myself go, and this club was the only thing keeping me here and really keeping me going -- and I needed that. And I think that's what helped me turn my life around and started doing well in my academics. Like with coming out and ending my relationship, it was tough, so I just kind of gave up. And then I got back on track because of SAGA.

Q: And what were some of the successes that you felt like happened during those years?

A: The numbers kept growing. At the beginning of every semester, they would get bigger, and bigger and bigger.

Q: How big?

A: I never counted. I think at some of the socials, I thought we had 120 people. And then -- and on an average meeting, we'd have 60 or 65 people, which is excellent for a community this small. And then, like watching other students grow, watching people coming in as a freshman, not being out at all, and then just watching them literally grow over a year or two years. And then they start coming out, and start being comfortable with who they are. And that's awesome, watching that from other people.

Q: Did you ever take any of the LGBT Studies courses?

A: I took one. It was an IDS course: "Intro to Queer Theory." I think?

Q: With Kim Hall?

A: No, I took it with Jill Ehnenn, and I dropped it. She gave me a list that had 13 novels on it that she wanted us to read for the semester, so I was just like, "No way I'm doing this." But I think that was my sophomore year. And then I took "Intro to LGBT Studies" with her again, and she had reduced the number to like, seven novels. And so I

took it, and that's the only specific LGBT class that I took.

Q: How was it?

A: It was good. I mean, other than the chats about *The L Word*, which really pissed me off.

Q: Hmm?

A: Like *The L Word*, like they would discuss *The L Word* for 20 minutes. Like, OK, A) I don't watch *The L Word*, B) we are not here to discuss *The L Word*. And then I felt like a lot of the literature that she did give us was lesbian-focused. Which I don't have a problem with it, but you know, out of seven novels, four of them focused on lesbianism or, like, lesbian relationships, which I don't understand those -- I'm not a lesbian. But I felt like she didn't really try to reach out to the guys in the class, which there wasn't but like, four of us. You know, I mean, it was -- I felt like it was a big lesbian circle, and a big lesbian discussion.

Q: How many other students were there besides the four males?

A: It was pretty small -- I think 16, 17 students? But a lot of them were good friends. But I remember her giving me a grade that I did not like, and she was like, "You know you didn't discuss things in class. You didn't speak up." And

then I was like, "Well, I don't watch *The L Word*." So me and her just -- we never got along after that.

Q: Mmm-hmm. Could you describe, outside of SAGA, what the campus is like in general, and specific for gay male students?

A: I've never really had any *bad* experience, or -- the thing that I have a problem with is people saying, "That's gay." And the new thing to say is like, "Oh, that's straight," meaning that it's good, you know? And I'm just like, "Don't say that, either, because by saying that 'That's straight/that's good,' you are implying that anything that's not straight is not good." So those are the only two that I don't like. And my friends say them. And then, you know, I let them know that it offends me, and it kind of hurts my feelings, and then -- and they work on it, and eventually they stop. But I've never had any real harassment, or any kind of problem up here at all. So it's been a good experience.

Q: You are a Sociology major?

A: Mmm-hmm.

Q: Do any of your classes other than Jill's class talk about sexuality?

A: "Gender and Society," "Sexual Deviance," "Social Deviance"... I brought up sexuality in a lot of classes

that it probably would never have been brought up. Like I took "Adolescent Development," and we talked about sexuality, but we didn't talk about *homosexuality*. We talked about teen suicide rates, but we didn't talk about suicide rates for LGBT youth, and that really, really -- it really upset me. Like how can you talk about sexuality and being a teen, and then not cover homosexuality at all? I think I have read studies that say gay students are three times more likely to kill themselves than heterosexual students. It's I made it a point to bring it up in class. Soc classes, a lot of them talk about sexuality, and deviant behavior. So...

Q: How do your classmates and teachers respond when you bring up things, like in the "Adolescent Development" class that the teacher wasn't bringing it up on their own?

A: She didn't respond to it the way I wanted her to. She was like, "Oh, that's a good point," and then she immediately went on to somebody else's question or comment -- I don't remember. But I mean, I got up and I left. You know? And then I was like, "Well, maybe she'll e-mail me. You know, maybe she realized that I was upset; maybe she'll e-mail me and want to talk about it." And then she never did, so I was just like, "This is a lost cause. Like you are going to keep doing this." And a lot of the people in the class

were future educators, so I'm like, "If this is what you want to do, fine. Like it shouldn't be the route you're taking, but you are, so..." And it's something that should have been a battle for me, to challenge her, but I was just like, "I can't." Like I was burnt out... personally, like with school and all that, so I was just like, "I can't add this to my plate." Which I should have, and I regret not doing it. But I did stand up and let her know some statistics.

Q: Was that also the time when you were changing your major from Education?

A: Nope. This was this semester.

Q: Oh, wow.

A: Yeah. This semester. So I already knew, like -- my concentration is Criminology and Social Control, and I want to work with adolescents and juveniles, and so that's why I took "Adolescent Development," thinking that it would help me, and it really didn't. But that was this semester.

Q: Would you mind talking about how a teenager in North Wilkesboro gets a boyfriend?

(laughter)

A: Oh... Well, when I met the guy in Wilkes that went to West who gave me his permit, we were just "friends with benefits" for two years. And then I wanted more, and I

knew he didn't, and then he was a compulsive liar. But I never dated anybody from Wilkes. I mean, it is small, and, like, you know, you don't want to date this person because they know all these people. And Wil- I mean, Wilkes is big as far as like, population and like, land area, but you feel like it's really small, because we're all so concentrated in Wilkes. So like, if you tell one person, or start dating one person, everybody is going to know about it.

My senior year, I did date somebody who went to my high school. He was younger. And then once I went back to high school after coming to college, like everybody was able to piece it together. But they didn't know it then, but now they know. And so that was hard for him, and he eventually had to come out because everybody knew about it. Which is not cool, but...

Q: How did students respond to him? I guess you had already gone on.

A: He was honestly like a mini-me. I mean, he really was. You know, like talking to other people, they are like, "He is just like you." So he didn't have it rough, but his family is crazy, and like, really crazy. Like his mom is... wow. So, he told her, "I'm gay. If you don't like

it, kiss my ass," pretty much. He gave her the ultimatum, like either accept it or I'm out. So I guess she's dealing with it. I don't know. I don't really talk to him anymore. But I met my first boyfriend at the club, Odyssey, in Winston, and we dated for a year. And then I met the partner that I'm with now up here my second semester of freshman year, and we have been together since.

Q: Really?

A: Four years March 30th.

Q: Wow.

A: Mmm-hmm.

Q: How is the support network for people who are in relationships, and do you feel like people are encouraging you on?

A: Oh, yeah. I mean, obviously, some people want to -- I mean, people are attracted to him, but they encourage our relationship. But it's a small community up here, so I'm glad I have been in one relationship and stuck it through the whole time I've been here. Other people aren't fortunate, and then because it is such a small area and a small community, people date everybody, and then everybody dates everybody. It's kind of iffy. Because especially in the lesbian community that I've noticed, one girl would date this girl, but then she'll also date eight other

girls, and those eight other girls have dated each other. And that's kind of awkward. And it doesn't help with SAGA environment either, because you date this one girl and then ya'll break up; you quit going, and then all of her friends going, she quits going... So it's just -- that's rough.

Q: Somewhat incestuous?

A: Yeah.

Q: Talk about that demonstration that you and your boyfriend participated in in front of the [Watauga County] courthouse.

A: To be completely honest, I didn't want to go. I felt obligated because I was an officer of SAGA. Because I don't like the whole institution of marriage, because I feel like it's so religious and it's tied to religion. Personally, I will never get married. I do want the legal benefits. But I went just so we could be heard: the gay community as a whole could be heard. I didn't go for personal reasons, or -- you know? I kind of felt obligated. But once I got there, I'm like, "People really need to -- they need to hear what we have to say." So then I felt good about being there, and I felt good about myself. So it was touching and emotional, but, I wish people who wanted to get married who are LGBT could.

Q: Were you one of the couples that went and applied for the marriage certificate?

A: We were. And it was really -- I've been working at Food Lion for a while, and I remember people who shop there read in the *Watauga Democrat* -- well, I guess my picture was in there, with quotes. And so I noticed a lot more customers coming through my line, and they would let me know about it. And now I have developed really personal relationships with some of the customers, and I feel like more gay people shop at Food Lion now, which is kind of -- I mean, it's not weird, but I guess like, when you notice that one person in the community is out and they're being active, you kind of respect that? And -- I don't know. I just notice a lot of more older gay people are shopping at where I work.

Q: And you are still working there?

A: Mmm-hmm. I am.

Q: And does your boyfriend have the same attitude about marriage as you do?

A: It's bad: after four years, we don't really talk about it. Like I mean, I have voiced my opinions, and I have not really asked him for his, which really makes me feel guilty and horrible, and maybe I should after the interview, but... he is not even out to his dad. His mom knows, his

brother knows, cousins and aunts and uncles know. His dad doesn't know. But I've never asked him.

Q: Where did he grow up?

A: Charlotte.

Q: And you met him at SAGA?

A: No. I met him at lip synch first semester of freshman year. His dorm and my dorm were the finalists in the competition, and when we were at Legend's rehearsing, you know, I turned around and told all my friends -- I'm like, "The black guy in the back is gay." And they're like, "No way!" I mean, because he is so buff and big, and he played football for App, and they are like, "No, he ain't." And I'm like, "He totally is." And then we had a mutual friend, and that's when I got all of his contact information. Then we started talking. And I don't think he'd ever been to SAGA until he met me.

Q: Are there a lot of students that don't go to SAGA?

A: Yeah. I always tell people there's like, three different types of communities up here: you have your SAGA gays, your LGBT Center gays, and then your just gays who don't do anything. And so, yeah, I'd say there's quite a few students who don't go to SAGA.

Q: What's the difference between SAGA and LGBT Center?

A: I think SAGA is more of a social group. I wanted it to be more social giving education. You want people to be active, but they are really not. You can only be as active as your members will let you be. And I feel like if you volunteer in the LGBT Center, it's because you really want to be active and get things done, and that's the difference. One group are the LGBT Center volunteers are active, and then members of SAGA are not really.

Q: And what about the folks that don't go to either?

A: They're not active at all, unless, there's a party or a drag show. Then you'll see them. But --

Q: Do they --

A: -- as far as --

Q: -- go to the clubs?

A: Like... ?

Q: Like Odyssey and --

A: Oh, yeah. I'm sure. Like --

Q: -- CCs [Club Cabaret]?

A: Yeah. I'm sure. I never really went with very many of them, but...

Q: OK. One question that we've been asking is would you go back to your high school reunion?

A: Oh, yeah. I'm most definitely going to go. Oh, yeah. I've been thinking about it a lot lately. And I honestly

can't wait. I mean, like A), I want to have Devon on my hip, because, he is my partner, and I am really proud of who I am today and how far I've come as a person, how much I've grown. And then, his race plays a lot into it. Like I really want to go back and be like, you know, "Not only am I gay, but he is also black." You know: "Now what?" You know? I just want to -- I don't know. I mean, so many people thought I wasn't going to go anywhere, and the people who thought bad of me, I just want to go back and let them know, that's not who I have turned out to be. So I want to prove myself, almost.

Q: Mmm-hmm. And do you think that being in Appalachia has had any effect on your development, sexually and, you know, otherwise?

A: I applied to UNC-G. That's where my first partner went to school. I applied there twice, got accepted, gave them my deposit for the room, and then we would break up or get into a fight, and I wouldn't go. But I've always told myself, if I went anywhere else, I think I would get so wrapped up in the nightlife or the gay scene that I wouldn't be who I am. I wouldn't get the education that I have today. So I think App's really helped me to stay focused, and not be so much of a party person. As to where

if I went to UNC-G, that would definitely have happened.
So that's how it's helped.

Q: Are there any stories that I didn't draw out of you that you would like recorded, either from back home or up here, or elsewhere?

A: Not any specific stories. I'm trying to think. I've never been verbally or physically harassed. I've had it pretty easy as far as coming out. It's an ongoing process -- you do it every day. But... And then I tell people now, like the gay card is such a card you can play -- it's so strong. I have problems with a guy at work who comes from Watauga Opportunities, Watauga Opportunities. And I remember him -
-

Q: What is "Watauga Opportunities?"

A: They have special needs people, and they provide them with on-job training and jobs. And so, I mean, they are all in a way physically or mentally -- I don't want to say "special," but that's the only word that's coming to me. But --

Q: "Developmentally delayed?"

A: Yeah. And so I work with a guy, and he got a job through Watauga Opportunity at Food Lion, and I remember him calling me a "faggot" once. I'm like, "OK, don't say that. It's not nice." And I think altogether, he has called me a

"faggot" four times. And anybody else, I would really get pissed off and angry, but because I know he is from Watauga Opportunity and I *know* he doesn't have the education everybody else would have -- but HR did get involved. And that's the only time I have ever had a serious problem with sexuality in any other aspect of my life.

Q: So Food Lion's management stuck up behind you?

A: Oh, yeah. Food Lion the company is really progressive. Very progressive. So that they were there within the week of the manager calling. So...

Q: Wow.

A: Mmm-hmm.

Q: And what interventions did they do?

A: They were going to fire him, but I asked them not to, because I didn't feel like he deserved to lose his job. He didn't know any better. And so I asked the HR representative if me and her could sit down and talk to him and educate him for 15, 20 minutes. I told her that he is going to get a lot more out of that than being fired and continue doing what he's doing. And that's what we did. And, me and him are pretty good friends. Like he calls me "Christina," and I'm OK with that. So... And I call him "Ramona," and he is OK with that. So, we have come a long way.

Q: Cool.

A: Mmm-hmm.

Q: All right. Thank you.

A: You're welcome.

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